

MARIPOSA LILY

Calochortus superbis Purdy ex J.T. Howell

plant symbol = CASU3

Contributed by: USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center



Alfred Brousseau
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Alternate Names

Butterfly Mariposa, Mariposa tulip, white Mariposa
(Note: mariposa is Spanish for butterfly)

Uses

Ethnobotanic: The sweet bulbs of this plant were eaten raw, roasted in ashes, boiled, or baked in an earth oven and relished by many tribes in California including the Pomo, Yuki, Sierra Miwok, Kawaiisu, Wappo, Tubatulabal, Foothill Yokuts, and Wailaki. The Sierra Miwok dug the bulbs in April when buds appeared or after flowering, while the Wukchumni Yokuts dug the plants in bloom about April or May. The bulbs were rubbed across an open-twined basket to remove the outer skin by some tribes. They were reputed to grow in "great tracts" on open hillsides in Mendocino County, California in the early 1900's. They were harvested with a digging stick and eaten within four or five days, as they do not store well.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Lily Family (Liliaceae). *Calochortus venustus* and *Calochortus superbis* have overlapping distributions and are hard to tell apart. They also were not separated as two distinct species in the first half of the 20th century when anthropologists were doing their fieldwork among tribes. Therefore, it is highly likely that tribes dug the bulbs of populations of both species. The large showy flowers of *Calochortus venustus* range from white, yellow, purple, to dark red, and have a red-brown eyespot above the gland on the inside of each petal. Sometimes there is a paler blotch above the first. The base of the plant is bulblet-bearing. The erect stems are branched and 1 to 6-flowered. The linear leaves are basal and 1-2 dm long. The fruit is erect, 5-6 cm, linear and angled.

The main identifying features that distinguish *Calochortus superbis* from *Calochortus venustus* is the nectary. On *Calochortus venustus* it is square, while on *Calochortus superbis* it is crescent or chevron-shaped. Another difference is that the petals on *Calochortus venustus* sometimes have a second distal, paler spot, while with *Calochortus superbis* the petal spot is always one, generally in the yellow zone.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. *Calochortus superbis* is found in open grassland, oak woodland, dry meadows, and mixed conifer forests below 1700 m in northwestern California, the Cascade Range foothills, central western California, the Sierra Nevada foothills, and southwestern California.

Establishment

Collect or buy seed from local sources. Place the seeds in a paper bag until you are ready to plant them. Plant them in a 5 inch or deeper pot in a soil that has excellent drainage. Scatter the seeds at least one-quarter inch apart. Sprinkle a light layer of soil on top and then place quarter-inch gravel on top of the soil. The seeds should be planted in the fall and require no stratification. Let the pots sit outside during the winter in partial shade. Water the pots, keeping them slightly damp (if rains are insufficient). Germination is generally about February. Fertilize the plants in a weak solution about once a month during active growth until April. When the tips of the leaves turn yellow, stop watering and fertilizing.

(about the end of April). The bulbs are dormant during flowering. In the fall start watering again. Give the plants more room in the fall of the second or third year by transplanting them and spacing them 1-2 inches apart. Plant the plants outside in the ground in the third or fourth year. Plant them in full sun in summer or fall. Start watering them in September. After they have bloomed for the first time, they should be established.

Management

Weed around the plants regularly and protect them from insects, birds, mammals, and other animals.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

CASU3 is somewhat available through native plant nurseries and seed companies within its range. Please check the Vendor Database, expected to be on-line through the PLANTS Web site in 2001 by clicking on Plant Materials.

References

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Prepared By & Species Coordinators

M. Kat Anderson

USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center
c/o Environmental Horticulture Department,
University of California, Davis, California

Wayne Roderick

Former Director of the East Bay Regional Parks
Botanic Garden, Berkeley, California

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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